**LOVE IS…**

***1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13***

***“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” (v. 4).***

In chapter 12, Apostle Paul taught about the gifts of the Spirit. We learned that gifts are given to each believer for the common good, serving and edifying others in the church. They exist to build up the body of Christ. For this purpose, we need to eagerly desire the greater gifts. At the end of the chapter, Paul says, ***“And yet I will show you the most excellent way” (12:31b).*** He gladly wants to introduce us to the most excellent way to build up the church in chapter 13. What is it? It is love. 1 Corinthians 13 has been called the best love poem ever written. Many people love this beautiful passage and have memorized and sung it. This chapter teaches us the true love that we must pursue. Through this passage, we can learn why love is the most excellent way to build up the church and what it looks like. May the Holy Spirit grant us great spiritual desire to grow in love!

1. **Without love, I am nothing: The essentiality of love (vs. 1-3)**

In verses 1-3, Paul explains why we need love by using the phrase ***“If I”*** four times. Look at verse 1. ***“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”*** Here, speaking in the tongues of men or of angels means the most eloquent speech that can move people’s hearts. Eloquence was greatly admired in the first century, and the Corinthians were no exception. We also may be envious of fluent and powerful speakers. But without love, it is like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. When a gong or cymbal is harmoniously played with other instruments, it may sound great. But if they are aimlessly resounded, the sounds may be just loud noise, difficult for anyone to endure. Likewise, without love, even the most fluent speech is nothing but meaningless noise.

Look at verse 2. ***“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”*** One may have tremendous spiritual insight that comes from the gifts of prophecy or a message of wisdom or a message of knowledge. He or she may be able to explain difficult passages of Scripture and how they might apply to our own times. In this uncertain world, if we have such insight, wisdom, and knowledge, how wonderful it would be in doing God’s work. However, if we do not have love, we are nothing. Some may have the gift of faith that can move mountains, performing surprising miracles such as healing incurable diseases, opening the eyes of the blind, or making the paralyzed walk. But without love, we are nothing. Here nothing means worthless, even less valuable than dust and ashes.

Look at verse 3. ***“If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”*** To help poor people is beautiful. It requires sacrifice. Some people sacrifice with a life-giving spirit to help the poor and the needy. In this selfish world, how beautiful it is! But even such self-sacrifice can be self-centered for one’s own honor or self-satisfaction. Paul says that if we do not have love, we gain nothing. Without love, such sacrifice can be fruitless.

When we observe verses 1-3, we see that without love, any spiritual gift is meaningless, unworthy, and futile. It seems that Paul is harshly devaluing spiritual gifts. But his intention is not depreciating the gifts, but strongly emphasizing the absolute necessity of love in using our gifts. The motive in exercising spiritual gifts must be love. The church is the body of Christ. It is a living organism. Life is invisible, but essential for our body. If we do not have life in our body, it is nothing but a dead corpse. In the same way, when we do not have love, individually and as a whole, we are dead and nothing (1Jn 3:14b). If we really want to be alive and want any of our spiritual service to be meaningful, valuable, and fruitful, we must grow as men and women of love. What then is love like and where can we get it?

1. **What love is like: The character of love (vs. 4-7)**

In this passage, when Paul uses the word “love”, he uses the Greek word, “agape.” Agape is God’s love. In verses 4-7, Paul tells us what this love is like.

First, love is patient and kind. Look at verse 4a. ***“Love is patient, love is kind…”*** Here to be patient means to endure personal wrongs without retaliating. It is to bear with others’ imperfections, faults, and differences, waiting a long time to see the effects of such patience on them. It gives others time to change. So patience needs long suffering. While patience is passive, kindness is an active way of loving. The Greek word “kind” comes from a word meaning “useful.” A kind person is willing to be useful and helpful to others. He looks for opportunities to serve those needs, even though they are his enemies.

How can we be patient and kind? It is possible when we remember God’s patience and kindness for each of us. Romans 2:4 says, *“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”* God forbears all of our wrongdoings in the hope that we will come to our senses and repent. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt 5:45). Out of his love, he gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ while we were his enemies (Ro 5:10).

God’s patience and kindness for us are visibly revealed in Jesus’ earthly life. While on earth, Jesus patiently bore with all kinds of people with his kindness. The very night before his crucifixion, Jesus’ heart must have been burdened and exhausted. But what were his disciples doing in that situation? They were disputing about which of them was considered to be greatest (Lk 22:24). Among them, Judas would soon betray Jesus, Peter would deny him three times, and all the disciples would abandon him. Jesus knew all these things, but patiently bore with them. He even took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash his disciples’ dirty and smelly feet (Jn 13:1-5).

Jesus was patient and kind all the way to the cross. Despite his unbearable pain and suffering, Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a).* In this way, he patiently bore our sins and kindly provided the way of forgiveness for each of us on the cross.

After his resurrection, Jesus’ disciples were yet directionless, and they were in despair due to their failures. They went back to their fishermen’s life on the Sea of Galilee. What is worse, that night they caught nothing. It was a cold and gloomy night. But Jesus visited the tired and weary disciples and prepared a lovely breakfast for them. He invited them, *“Come and have breakfast”* *(Jn 21:12).* Their hearts were melted by Jesus’ love and their love relationship with him was fully restored.

Without God’s long-suffering patience and kindness, we would have surely already perished. Thanks to God’s love, however, we are all here now. God understands our weaknesses and has compassion on us. So Jesus commands us, *“Love each other as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).* We cannot love others with our own strength, but when we remember God’s compassion and love for us, we can be patient and kind towards our brothers and sisters, and even our enemies in the hope of the fruit of love.

Second, love is pure. True love is pure because it comes from God, who is perfectly pure (1Jn 3:3-5, 4:8). When we love our brothers and sisters in God’s love, it drives away any impurity and darkness in our lives, and nothing can make us stumble (1Jn 2:10). What is the darkness that we must drive out? Look at verses 4b-6. ***“It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”***

First of all, “Love does not envy.” It is interesting that both envy and love have zeal. But the emphasis is different. Love has zeal for others, but envy has zeal for oneself. When we have love, we can recognize others’ strong points, accept them, and be happy for their excellence and success. Pride is an attitude of heart that exalts oneself over others. Boasting is the expression of this pride. The boastful begin their conversations with “I”, and end with “me”. They boast about themselves until others feel low self-esteem. But true love give others esteem while limiting our own esteem. Love does not dishonor others. Despising and hurting others in word or action is not from love. Love is courteous, polite, and sensitive to the feelings of others. The reason we are not courteous is that we are thinking only of ourselves and not of others. Love is not easily angered. To be easily angered means to be easily provoked or stirred up. There is a saying, “Anger cannot rest in the bosom where love reigns.” It is hard to be angry with those we love. As a result, love is not self-seeking, but thinks about others’ interests, welfare, and feelings more than oneself.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. Usually people are quick to forget the grace shown to them and slow to forget the wrongs done by others. Sinful man wants to remember every harm done to him in detail, nursing his wounds and scars, with a desire to avenge. Keeping a record of wrongs poisons relationships. Furthermore, an unforgiving heart torments one’s own soul even more. However, love keeps no record of wrongs. What if God kept a record of all our wrongs and reminded us of each one again and again, every day. No one could survive (Ps 130:3). Amazingly, when we repent of our sins based on the blood of Jesus, God forgives us, erasing all of our wrongs, and remembers them no more (Jer 31:34). God promises that though our sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow (Isa 1:18). When we accept this love of God in our hearts, we can love others, keeping no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Some may misunderstand that love condones evil. But true love is holy love. To allow another person to go on sinning is not love. True love is grounded in the truth. We should grieve over the sins of others as our Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem due to the sins of the people and God’s impending judgment upon them (Lk 19:41). True love will sensitively confront and precisely correct because it cares deeply and knows that sin destroys. To rejoice with the truth means that we are happy when others behave in accordance with the truth of God’s word. We are glad when others repent of their sins, live by God’s word, and experience spiritual victories. Overall, love is pure without any impurity or darkness. When we are full of God’s love and governed by his love, nothing can make us stumble.

Third, love is constant. Look at verse 7. ***“It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*** Here “always” means “in all things,” or “in all circumstances.” Love never changes regardless of the situation. Love is firmly determined to protect, trust, hope, and persevere to the end. Sometimes we may encounter others’ mistakes and sins. Whatever it may be, love protects and covers the failures. So 1 Peter 4:8 says, *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”* Sometimes we may experience a difficult situation to trust others in their speaking or actions. But love is not suspicious or doubting of the other person’s character or motives without good reason. Love always hopes in spite of the loved one’s shortcomings. Love sees the person’s potential and never gives up hope for even the most hopeless. When we have hope we can persevere through all kinds of disappointments, failures, and sufferings.

God is determined to protect, trust, hope and persevere for his chosen children to the end. His constant love is like the surf on the seashore. The surf is approaching endlessly. Even if we are covered with sands or mud, whenever we throw our body into the surf, the water washes away all of it. God’s love and grace is ceaselessly approaching us. What we need to do is to come to him again and again as we are and entrust ourselves to his love. Based on God’s unchanging love, we can love others constantly.

In verses 4-7, we learned what love is like. Love is selfless, wholly directed to build up others with a pure motive to the end. Of course, nobody can perfectly love like that. Only God can do it. It seems that Paul’s description of love is a picture of Christ himself, who is full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14). If we replace the word “love” with the name “Christ” in verses 4-7, we can have a perfect description of our Lord Jesus. If we want to love one another, we must focus on his love for us, learn from him and walk in his Spirit, who produces his love in us (Gal 5:22).

1. **Love never fails: The eternal nature of love (vs. 8-13)**

Look at verse 8. ***“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.” “Love never fails”*** means that love is eternal, in comparison to the spiritual gifts of which the Corinthians boasted. Gifts are used to build up the church before Jesus’ Second Coming. But when Jesus comes again, they will disappear (10), and only love will remain. When Christ comes in power and glory, he will transform all of his people to bear the image of God perfectly.

Until that time, although we eagerly want to know God’s love and grow in his image, our understanding of his love and his image in us is imperfect. So Paul says that we are like children in this matter, and we see only a reflection as in a mirror (11-12a). Unlike today, in Paul’s time, people used bronze mirrors to see their faces. But the reflection was very poor. However, we have wonderful hope. Look at verse 12. ***“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”*** When Christ comes we shall see him face to face. This means that we will know him as he truly is. We will have a perfect love relationship with Christ and our heavenly Father which lasts forever. We shall be like Christ, especially in his love. Love is eternal. Love that begins to blossom in our hearts as we live in this world will bear fruit into eternity.

Look at verse 13. ***“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”*** Faith, hope and love are all essential in our Christian life. Yet love is the most precious. Out of his love, God created us in his own image and gave us paradise. But due to our rebellion against him, we lost our love relationship with God and the paradise. However, out of his love, God sent us his one and only Son Jesus to restore our broken relationship and give us the restored paradise. By faith in Jesus we are saved. Now, we hope for the glorious and perfect kingdom of God. Our faith and hope are all produced out of God’s love for us. Without God’s amazing love, nothing would happen to us. Without love, nothing will happen to us. Love is the most essential, and everlasting jewelry that we must hold on to. Love is everything to us and love is sufficient for us. When we know God’s love and practice it, we are tasting the kingdom of God in the body of Christ. Love is the most excellent way, so we must desire this love more than anything else. Let’s pray to remember and learn the love of God and practice it. Then we can be truly happy and build up the body of Christ.